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ABSTRACT

As a result of new adult education funding arrangements announced by the Further Education Funding Council for England in Spring 2000, short courses of 3 or 6 hours duration were developed that concentrated on basic skills, information and communications technology (ICT), and general lifelong learning subjects. Courses were designed as minicourses or introductory modules but were not necessarily linked to degree or certificate qualification. Twenty post-secondary institutions participated in the program and were interviewed for this evaluation. Students taking the courses tended to be female, aged 60 and over, and Caucasian. Courses taken by those identified as members of an ethnic minority were predominantly English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). The goal of the initiative was to attract new learners into courses that could provide progression opportunities. The program was considered successful because the courses were valuable in providing an introduction to learning itself. These areas of concern were among those raised by the evaluation: (1) inadequate institution systems to determine how new "new" learners were; (2) limited progression opportunities based upon learners' goals; (3) low enrollment in basic skills courses; and (4) administrative time spent on short courses being the same as that spent on longer ones. (AJ)

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LSDA reports

Evaluation of 3 and 6-hour courses

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Note
The Learning and Skills Development Agency was formerly known as FEDA.

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1 Introduction

1.1 In Spring 2000 the Further Education Funding Council for England (FEFC) announced a number of new funding arrangements for adult learners. They formed part of the Council's response to the learning pathways agenda set by the Widening Participation Committee chaired by Helena Kennedy, and other developments such as the establishment of the University for Industry (Ufi), Learndirect centres, information and communications technology (ICT) centres and family and community learning.

1.2 These arrangements were set out in FEFC Circular 00/11, and one of the new initiatives involved funding, for the first time, some courses of just 3 or 6 hours duration – the previous minimum was 9 hours. The Council also announced in the Circular its intention to evaluate the initiative in order to assess the impact of the new provision and to inform future policy development.

1.3 The Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) was selected to carry out that evaluation. The FEFC's data relating to the initiative were made available to LSDA, and visits were made to a sample of 20 institutions, where senior staff, managers, tutors and learners were interviewed. The findings from that fieldwork and data analysis form the basis of this report. In order to evaluate further the ongoing impact of the initiative on individual learners, researchers will be carrying out a longitudinal survey of learners and following up some of the issues identified by institutions. The researchers wish to acknowledge and thank all those in the institutions who freely gave their time and data to help the research.

2 Summary of findings

2.1 **This initiative was widely welcomed by institutions.** It was seen as providing a much-needed opportunity to offer new courses which would have a wide appeal, and which would help in achieving objectives relating to widening participation. In over three-quarters of the institutions visited, the initiative had triggered development work involving course design, times and venues. It stimulated outreach work and led to institutions reviewing marketing approaches, learning resources and staff development activity. It was also welcomed because it recognised the value of informal learning that does not lead directly to a qualification.

2.2 **The initiative has had a substantial impact on the pattern of provision in ICT.** At the time of the fieldwork ICT tasters had already been delivered in 90% of the institutions in the sample. A large number of new courses have been offered and have attracted large numbers of learners. There is good institutional evidence that many of them are from the 'technologically disadvantaged' target group, and that a significant number are people who have not engaged in learning for some time – although there are no systems in place to track individuals who may have moved between providers. At those institutions supplying data during the fieldwork, progression rates from the short courses have generally been high, with all but two reporting that more than 60% of learners had moved on to other courses. Learners were enthusiastic when describing their further studies.

2.3 **Institutions report that a significant number of the learners enrolling on ICT courses appear to have basic skills needs.** This is an important finding and one which deserves further study. There are implications for policy-makers, funding bodies, institutions and tutors. It would be a mistake to assume that all adult learners with basic skills needs are participating in basic skills programmes.

2.4 **The impact on basic skills provision has not been significant.** Institutions appear to have had more flexibility in the ways they offered basic skills courses in the past and therefore this initiative was not seen as providing the same kinds of new opportunities as in ICT. Less than a quarter of institutions visited had developed new provision in basic skills for this initiative. A shortage of basic skills coordinators and managers also appears to have hindered development work.

2.5 **The initiative did encourage some new provision in programme areas other than ICT and basic skills**, especially in those institutions with little or no previous experience of offering non-schedule 2 courses. However, fewer than a quarter of institutions visited were offering courses in this category, and other institutions planned provision in this area but withdrew their plans when the further guidance appeared.

2.6 **The initiative has highlighted the crucial value of 'taster' provision for many learners.** It is clear that these very short courses enabled people to sample the experience of learning as well as the subject area. It enabled them to see what the learning environment was like, how it felt to be part of a group of learners, and to get to know a tutor. It appears that the taster experience can be a valuable part of the 'entry' process, alongside advice and guidance, in helping people to decide their next steps and improve their self-confidence. Some learners are reluctant to commit themselves to a longer course for many reasons – uncertainty about the time commitment, their ability, the course content, costs and so on – and a taster can help them to decide whether it would suit their needs. Tasters also help in terms of progression and achievement, because they can help people to gauge their ability and interest, and to decide their preferred progression route. This crucial role played by tasters warrants further study – it has implications for funding bodies, for the ways in which institutions plan their curriculum, and for tutors.

2.7 **Tutor-led courses, where students are taught as a group, were a key feature of good practice** described by learners, tutors and managers. Learners valued working with a tutor who could explain things clearly and did not just 'leave them to it'. Some learners said that they had decided to enrol for a further course because they knew that the same tutor would be leading it.

3 Key issues arising from the evaluation

3.1 This was a successful initiative, which has highlighted the intrinsic value of short episodes of learning. **This should be recognised in future funding methodologies.**

3.2 This initiative has shown that ICT is of interest to many learners with basic skills needs. Learners have been attracted to the ICT taster because it has required a minimum commitment of time, it has been carefully described as 'for beginners', and there have been no expectations in terms of either previous experience or gaining a qualification. **It is important that policies and strategies are developed – by funding bodies and institutions – to link basic skills provision with ICT.**

3.3 The majority of providers in the sample used information systems that are able to identify if a learner is attending a course at that institution for the first time. However, no provider could identify whether an individual had attended formal or informal learning opportunities elsewhere (locally, nationally or internationally). **It is important that a national system is developed to track progression of learners across providers** (eg by allocating individuals with a lifelong learning number similar to the National Insurance system). This would provide valuable information about learner behaviour and would enable policy steers to target genuinely new learners.

3.4 The taster opportunity is a whole experience and should not be interpreted as only tasting the subject. Individual learners need to feel comfortable in their surroundings, with their tutor, the teaching approaches and in the company of their fellow learners. They are also tasting how taking the time out of their lives to do this fits in with their work, leisure time and home responsibilities, etc. **Tasters should be recognised as a valuable first step for adult learning and funded accordingly.**

3.5 Taster programmes need to be planned and delivered to meet the wide range of needs that an adult learner brings to a learning situation. This should involve appropriate consultation, provision of information, adult-friendly environments, empathy, appropriate teaching methods, resources and support which take account of the variety of learning styles, abilities and interests. It should also make links with further learning opportunities. These factors all have resource implications and this should be recognised in any funding methodology.

3.6 When learners experience success, recognise their achievement and feel comfortable in the learning environment they often widen their horizons in terms of their personal aspirations. If they have learned successfully on one occasion they are often tempted to try something different, which is not necessarily at the next level in the same curriculum area.

(Learners in this study who had done an ICT taster were thinking about studying a language to prepare for holidays or aromatherapy to alleviate stress.) **We should recognise and value 'progression' in a broad sense, so as to include vertical, horizontal and other forms of development.**

3.7 There was a wide range of institutional responses to the initiative. Those institutions that used it most effectively had taken a **whole-college approach**, with support and direction from a senior manager. They had also considered how best to implement the short course initiative in conjunction with other related initiatives such as the non-schedule 2 pilots, unitisation and Learndirect.

4 An outline of the initiative and its aims

4.1 FEFC Circular 00/11 described the groups of people who were expected to benefit from the initiatives described. They were:

- adults who may not have had access to FEFC-funded provision in the past, including those whose backgrounds may have disadvantaged them and who may lack qualifications and/or successful educational experience, and need short courses as an essential precursor to schedule 2 provision
- adults who were 'technologically disadvantaged', who may not have had the opportunity to develop ICT skills, either because of lack of access to software and hardware, or for other reasons
- adults in areas where traditional industries had declined, who may need to develop new employment skills to enable them to move into new areas of employment.

4.2 Annex A to Circular 00/11 contained the details of the three categories of short courses that would be eligible for funding under the new arrangements:

- Basic Skills courses, which might be either 3 hours or 6 hours in length, with 3-hour courses being used as tasters, specific intensive programmes or as diagnostic sessions. Funding for these courses has been available since May 2000.
- ICT courses, where 3-hour courses would provide introductory or taster sessions which need not lead to a qualification (ie were outside schedule 2). Funding for these courses has been available since May 2000.
- Other short courses for adults, of 6 hours duration. For the period May 2000 to July 2000, these courses had to fall within schedule 2, but from 1 August 2000 a wider range of courses could be funded, but still with a primary objective of progression to further education, training or for employment skills.

4.3 Briefly, the two key aims of this initiative are attracting **new learners** into courses that would provide **progression** opportunities.

4.4 Annex B to the Circular gave draft guidance on possible course content, on standards and on other issues such as links with Ufi. The Circular also included other initiatives aimed at widening participation, including extensions of the unitisation and non-schedule 2 pilots and proposals for changes in 'access to FE' courses. These initiatives were not part of the brief for this evaluation.

4.5 In January 2001 the FEFC issued further guidance to institutions about the funding eligibility of the 3 and 6-hour courses. This helped to clarify many matters of detail, for example the circumstances in which a learner could follow more than one such course. It also stated that courses in the third category above (the 'others' category) had to fall within schedule 2. To many institutions this appeared to contradict the statement in paragraph 42 of Annex A to Circular 00/11, and was clearly a source of confusion to some institutions.

5 Local funding arrangements

5.1 In order to understand the possible range of responses to this initiative, it is useful to review the variety of funding and delivery arrangements operating in different areas of the country.

5.2 In some areas, colleges deliver FEFC-funded courses and Local Education Authorities (LEAs) deliver non-schedule 2 provision through separately managed adult education centres. For some colleges in such areas this initiative therefore provided the first opportunity to receive funding for non-schedule 2 courses of any kind.

5.3 In other areas LEAs contract out their non-schedule 2 provision to various providers, including colleges. In some of these cases the LEA funding supports provision that has traditionally been called non-vocational, so the initiative was seen as an opportunity to offer non-accredited courses which focused on basic or employability skills.

5.4 In other localities – perhaps the majority – funding arrangements are a complex mix of the two models described above. Many LEAs receive FEFC funding as external institutions, and colleges offer a range of non-schedule 2 courses, sometimes funded by LEAs. Partnerships often operate to coordinate basic skills provision in an area, and referral and progression arrangements for students may be well developed. In these areas the initiative was often seen as an opportunity to reach new groups of learners simply because of the short duration of the courses involved.

5.5 These issues are explored in more detail in Sections 9 and 10, where issues relating to the implementation and the impact of the initiative are discussed.

6 The sample of institutions

6.1 Twenty institutions were visited as part of the evaluation. They were chosen to provide as representative a sample as possible. Researchers visited:

- eight general further education (FE) colleges
- four tertiary colleges
- four sixth form colleges
- one agricultural college
- one specialist designated institution
- one LEA adult education service
- one university.

6.2 Two of the institutions were in inner London, 12 in other urban settings and six in rural environments. Six were institutions with high FEFC widening participation (WP) factors (>1.02, the upper quartile), nine with medium WP factors (between 1.005 and 1.02) and five were in the lower quartile (WP factor <1.005). The institutions visited were located in 18 different local Learning and Skills Council (LSC) areas, in all nine FEFC regions.

6.3 In addition, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) was contacted to discuss how the initiative had contributed to a community-based project.

7 The learners

7.1 The data in this section is taken from the national ISR returns for 1999/2000 (ISR17), and therefore relate to those learners who enrolled at any institution in the first stages of this initiative, in May, June and July 2000. In due course it will be possible to carry out further analyses as ISR information for 2000/01 becomes available.

7.2 Because the 3 and 6-hour courses aim to recruit new learners who might have been disadvantaged by their backgrounds, this analysis concentrates on comparing the profile of enrolments on these courses with the profile of part-time adult enrolments in general. To be precise, the comparator group consists of all FEFC-funded enrolments over the age of 19 following courses not classified as 'full-time' in 1999/2000.

Gender

	Male:female ratio
All 3 and 6-hour courses	**35:65**
3 and 6-hour ICT courses	36:64
3 and 6-hour basic skills courses	40:60
Other 3 and 6-hour courses	33:67
All 19+ part-time learners	**39:61**

7.3 Other sources of information about learners on non-schedule 2 courses (such as Ofsted reports and surveys carried out by LEAs) show that on such courses the male:female ratio is generally about 25:75. Hence it appears that these short courses may well be achieving a more representative balance of enrolments than their equivalents to date.

Age

	Learners aged 60 or over (%)
All 3 and 6-hour courses	**7**
3 and 6-hour ICT courses	20
3 and 6-hour basic skills courses	11
Other 3 and 6-hour courses	4
All 19+ part-time learners	**7**

7.4 The figures for the ICT courses are particularly interesting, and are in line with the pattern reported by institutions during the fieldwork – it was felt that these courses were successful in attracting older learners. There was a significant difference between the genders in this category only – 26% of the males learning ICT were aged 60 or over, compared with 16% of the females.

Ethnic origin

	Learners from ethnic minority backgrounds (%)
All 3 and 6-hour courses	**7**
3 and 6-hour ICT courses	6
3 and 6-hour basic skills courses	28
Other 3 and 6-hour courses	5
All 19+ part-time learners	**12**

7.5 It appears that the short courses have not attracted as high a proportion of learners from ethnic minorities as traditional provision. This must, to some extent, be a function of the age profile of the learners, since the older population has a smaller proportion of people from ethnic minorities. (See also paragraph 7.6 below). Further analysis is necessary in this area as more data becomes available in 2001. The high figure in basic skills reflects the fact that English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is included in that programme area.

WP factors

	Learners with WP postcodes (%)
All 3 and 6-hour courses	**23**
3 and 6-hour ICT courses	17
3 and 6-hour basic skills courses	36
Other 3 and 6-hour courses	23
All 19+ part-time learners	**26**

7.6 These findings should be treated with caution. At face value, they show that during the initial stages of the implementation of this initiative, learners were not attracted in larger numbers than usual from areas with high widening participation factors. However, the initial data provided by FEFC shows that the average WP factor of the institutions participating in the initiative in 1999/2000 was 1.014, lower than the sector average of 1.023. This is significantly different, and probably means that in the participating institutions the initiative was successful in targeting learners with high WP factors. There is some evidence from the fieldwork that as the initiative has developed institutions are attempting to target more specifically than they were able to do in the summer of 2000, but as yet no data is available about which institutions are participating. This will be an important area to monitor as future data becomes available for analysis. The low average WP factor of participating institutions may also account for the low proportion of learners from ethnic minority communities.

7.7 Circular 00/11 also envisaged a further target group, described as 'technologically disadvantaged'. It is clear from the fieldwork that the ICT courses were successful in attracting learners from this group.

8 What did institutions think of the initiative?

8.1 Without exception, the institutions visited by researchers were very positive about this initiative. In the simplest terms, the availability of FEFC funding for short courses, often consisting of just one session, was welcomed as a much-needed step forward. It was felt that very short courses appealed to many people who were unlikely to enrol for longer programmes, for a variety of reasons. These reasons included a lack of confidence in their ability, a feeling that they did not want to start something that they might not be able to finish, or because they felt the course might not be what they wanted. Other people felt that they might learn everything they wanted in a single session, or did not want to commit themselves to series of weekly classes (although in many cases they subsequently did). An additional appeal of most of the courses was the opportunity to start them straight away, as there was usually no long wait between signing up and doing the course.

8.2 For many institutions with considerable experience in adult education, funding for short courses was seen as validating existing work such as taster courses or Saturday workshops that they were already offering or trying to develop, but which had been hampered by lack of funding, or limited in scope by intermittent funding attached to specific initiatives such as Adult Learners' Week. For those institutions with more limited experience of adult education, or in areas where they did not have access to non-schedule 2 funding, the initiative provided the opportunity to offer, in some cases for the first time, tasters or non-accredited courses. Hence nearly all institutions described the initiative as opening up promotional opportunities for them, albeit of a 'loss-leader' variety in some cases.

8.3 The intrinsic value of 'taster' provision was highlighted by many providers. It was felt that the FEFC funding methodology encouraged the view that the normal process of entry onto a course was the provision of some form of advice or guidance followed by enrolment, whereas many learners benefited greatly from a taster before commencing their main programme of study. This was seen as improving the learner's confidence and being of great value in the selection of the most appropriate programme of study, increasing the likelihood of successful completion of the course. Tasters are seen in many cases as providing a taste of a particular curriculum area, but it is clear from the fieldwork that for many learners these courses are crucial in providing a taste of learning itself. They enable people to find out what it is like to be in a class at a particular centre, and to find out, without the feeling of commitment implicit in a longer course, whether it is an experience they enjoy.

8.4 Hence for a variety of reasons, the funding of these very short courses was welcomed as an important development in itself.

8.5 Many institutions also emphasised their belief that for many adults, acquiring a skill was more important than gaining a qualification, and therefore welcomed the fact that funding was available through this scheme for non-accredited activity, at least in the ICT area.

8.6 All institutions felt that the initiative supported their own strategic aims for widening participation, and felt that they would be able to use it as a vehicle that would help them to achieve those aims. Many felt that through this scheme they would be better able to target people who were educationally or technologically disadvantaged. It was seen as supportive of other initiatives such as the UfI and the national Basic Skills Strategy. Although several institutions expressed concerns about the implementation of Learndirect, many had Learndirect centres and all had ambitions to expand and enhance their involvement in ICT. All institutions recognised that this initiative could play a part in their plans in this area.

8.7 A minority of institutions felt that there were too many separate schemes aimed at the same target groups of learners, such as this initiative, the non-schedule 2 pilots and the unitisation proposals. Nevertheless, they too valued the scheme per se. Some institutions made considerable efforts to ensure that they were making best use of the various initiatives by taking a coordinated approach, trying to use each scheme to target individuals in a particular group or area.

8.8 Institutions varied in their views about the adequacy of the funding provided for these courses. When asked what would constitute a viable group size if the funding provided was used exclusively for the courses, responses ranged from four to 16. The majority felt that the funding was fairly generous, and welcomed the fact that it would enable small groups to be supported.

8.9 Several colleges reported that supplementary benefits had arisen as a result of implementing this initiative. For example, some sixth form colleges felt it was helping to raise awareness among staff of the learning needs of adults (described by one manager as engendering a 'customer focus rather than an audience focus'). Other providers, with a limited experience of running non-schedule 2 courses, said that the initiative was helping to bring curriculum managers together to plan on a college-wide basis. Managers at another college said that the emphasis on outreach provision was helping them to access new community venues for the first time. For example, it gave staff at those venues an awareness of issues in adult education and experience of some of the practicalities involved in managing and delivering courses.

8.10 All providers felt that it was important that the key features of this scheme should be retained so that short courses would continue to be funded under the LSC.

9 Implementation of the initiative

9.1 The first opportunity to offer courses funded under the arrangements set out in Circular 00/11 was in the summer term of 2000, and about 50% of institutions did so. The enrolments in that period, which are analysed in Section 7, comprised 1413 in the basic skills programme area, 10,142 in ICT, and 9318 in others. This latter figure is an over-estimation of actual activity under this initiative (see paragraph 9.17). Evidence from the fieldwork visits indicates that most of the courses in this period were offered as 'summer schools', following the pattern established in 1998 and 1999 for basic skills provision. Particularly for ICT courses, this enabled some institutions to use spare capacity (in both staff and accommodation) at an otherwise quiet time of year.

9.2 According to the returns made to the FEFC, almost all institutions in the sector planned to offer short courses in 2000/01, and they did so in a wide variety of ways. Some programmes were launched in September 2000, others in January 2001, and others were just getting under way when the fieldwork was undertaken in February/March 2001. There is some evidence that the figures for 2000/2001 will show a higher proportion of ICT enrolments than in 1999/2000.

9.3 Only two of the 20 institutions in the sample had chosen not to implement the initiative at the time of the fieldwork. In one case this was because the college had hoped to include the short courses in its programme of Saturday courses, but these were not recruiting well. In the other case the college felt that its wide range of new community-based programmes was already attracting large numbers of learners from the widening participation target groups. Both colleges were keeping the matter under review and said that they might offer some 3 and 6-hour courses later in 2000/01.

9.4 One institution that was enthusiastic about the potential benefits of the initiative had run only one course because it had already achieved its FEFC unit targets. It expressed frustration that additional funding units were not available to support the initiative.

Range and types of programmes offered

9.5 The three areas of provision – basic skills, ICT and other adult short courses – are described separately in this section.

Basic skills courses

9.6 There was no strong evidence from the fieldwork visits that there had been a significant change in either the volume or pattern of basic skills provision as a result of this initiative. The fieldwork revealed some differences between the various types of provider in this programme area, but given the size of the sample this may not be significant. At the time of the visits, none of the general FE colleges reported any significant successes in achieving enrolments onto new short courses in this category, despite considerable efforts in some cases. The tertiary and sixth form colleges and the LEA visited reported more success.

Several colleges reported that they were experiencing significant difficulties in recruiting coordinators, managers or project leaders for basic skills provision, and that this had impacted on their ability to undertake new work in this area. In addition, institutions reported that a good deal of management time had been devoted to the national Basic Skills Quality Initiative.

9.8 Where basic skills courses did recruit, the pattern was as envisaged in Circular 00/11 and the subsequent guidance. The 3-hour courses were used as diagnostic sessions, with the 6-hour courses being used for introductory courses or for specific skills. Courses were offered at college sites and in a range of community venues, where specific groups might be targeted – eg parents of children at a primary school.

9.9 Many providers already offer short diagnostic sessions and introductory sessions for learners with basic skills needs. These sessions may be funded by non-FEFC sources or eventually by the FEFC as part of a longer programme. Hence it is possible that institutions have not seen the provisions in Circular 00/11 as a particular opportunity in this programme area. There is some evidence that many of the basic skills short courses funded under the initiative might have taken place anyway, although funded from a different source. This may be an area where there is too much overlap between initiatives, such that the short course programme did not provide added benefits.

Learner profile

Jenny is a school special support assistant and would like to become a special needs teacher's assistant. She would also like to be able to help her son with his maths. She received a leaflet from his school about a free 'Maths for Parents' course, held on three afternoons in November in a building attached to the school. She talked to a community outreach worker and decided to give it a try. She liked the tutor and liked the adult atmosphere – and the adult-sized chairs and tables! – and really felt that she had learned something. So when someone from the college's telesales team contacted her in January, she decided to enrol on a course at the college's maths workshop, which is at the college's main site, on a bus route. She is now following courses leading to OCN accreditation and is now planning to do maths GCSE.

ICT courses

9.10 Circular 00/11 provided the opportunity for institutions in the sector to offer new ICT courses: on the whole they embraced this opportunity, and offered a wide range of courses that were successful in attracting large numbers of learners. Managers and tutors were enthusiastic about the extra flexibility provided by this initiative.

9.11 The types of venue used by institutions for short ICT courses can be categorised into four broad groups:

- Main sites where there are extensive ICT facilities. These included flexible 'drop-in' centres (sometimes Learndirect centres) as well as IT suites where learners are taught in groups.
- ICT learning centres in other locations, often 'high street' style venues, where students are usually enrolled on flexible programmes on a roll-on roll-off basis, although these tasters took place outside normal opening times and learners were taught in groups. Some of these were also Learndirect centres.
- Rooms in community venues, including schools, where the college delivers a range of community provision. Schools' IT suites are often used, and in other cases laptops computers are brought into these venues at specific times for ICT courses.
- Venues of a much more informal nature – supermarkets, pubs, job centres (even private homes in one case) – where there are no formal training areas but where small groups can be accommodated if laptop computers are brought in. Essentially, this can be seen as the provision of a mobile learning service.

9.12 Most of the provision offered by institutions visited during the fieldwork fell into the second and third categories above. Those institutions that were targeting disadvantaged people most specifically were more likely to be using venues in the third and fourth categories.

9.13 A fifth mode of delivery was offered by the agricultural college in the sample. In addition to extensive on-site provision, the college used a bus to offer a mobile service, targeting groups of employers in remote rural areas – perhaps SMEs using farm premises.

9.14 Since all the courses were very short and of an extremely introductory nature, they were necessarily similar in terms of course content. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern three broad types of course, or differences in approach:

- True 'tasters' designed to build confidence in using a computer and to demonstrate the range of tasks that can be undertaken with PCs. The best tasters had specifically designed learner packs (or used existing material such as the BBC's 'Computers don't Bite' programme), enabled learners to produce something (eg their own certificate of achievement), and whetted the learner's appetite for further exploration by suggesting a range of ways in which they might progress.
- 'Introductory' courses designed to prepare learners for existing courses such as Computing for Beginners, CLAIT or similar provision. In some institutions the majority of new ICT learners were undertaking a 3-hour or 6-hour course before moving on to other ICT courses.
- Short courses with more specific aims, such as 'Introduction to the Internet' or 'Starting to use e-mail'. Again, in many cases these were seen as a precursor to further study on a longer course.

9.15 The vast majority of providers offered these short ICT courses as taught courses, with students in specific groups led by a tutor. It was felt that the target group of learners were likely to be lacking in confidence and would benefit from the support provided by a tutor and by being part of a group.

In a few cases learners attended flexible learning centres alongside learners engaged in a range of other ICT provision, but even in these cases specific support was usually provided by a tutor or facilitator.

Learner profile
Rita felt at rock-bottom after the break-up of her marriage, and she needed a job. A new year prompted her to make a new start, and she enrolled on a desktop publishing 'taster' at the skills centre in the high street. She has since gained the CLAIT qualification and is doing further courses. She uses a taxi to get to the centre, which she now attends for 2–3 hours most days, Monday to Saturday.

Adult short courses

9.16 Most of the institutions visited during the fieldwork had not made any specific plans to offer any new provision in this category as a result of this initiative, and were not planning to do so.

9.17 Nevertheless, the national data for 1999/2000 shows that this category generated a substantial number of enrolments. In particular, there were enrolments for 3-hour courses in this category, where there should have been none. This warrants further exploration. Possible reasons are:

- Some distance and open learning enrolments may have been mis-coded.
- Some institutions may not have realised that the minimum number of hours for this category was 6, not 3.
- Some institutions may have mis-coded other provision such as key skills and complementary studies.

9.18 Some of the 6-hour courses that were offered and funded through this initiative may formerly have been 9 hours in length – the previous minimum. Hence they would not be regarded as new provision by institutions, but it is possible that the availability of funding for shorter courses has reduced the pressure to overteach on some of these programmes, or made them more viable.

9.19 A significant minority of institutions, however, had made plans to offer an extensive programme of short courses in this category. These were generally institutions that had not had the opportunity in the past to offer non-schedule 2 courses, and saw this initiative as providing that opportunity. Examples of programmes planned included:

- a summer school of vocational tasters on the themes of employability and personal development
- an outreach programme specifically designed to attract new learners in disadvantaged areas, offering holistic therapies
- Saturday workshops including specific employment-related areas such as assertiveness at work and employment law.

9.20 However, the apparent change in emphasis between the publication of Circular 00/11 and the additional guidance – which appeared to require that all such courses should be in schedule 2 – resulted in most of these institutions abandoning their plans to run these courses. This was clearly a cause of frustration for these institutions. Although the courses that were planned in some areas had a somewhat traditional 'recreational' look, there is no doubt that in other cases a significant effort had been made by institutions to offer courses that were of direct relevance to employability skills, as envisaged in the Circular.

9.21 Some institutions did offer an imaginative and flexible mix of courses in this category. Examples included:

- a summer school programme that included courses on digital cameras, alternative therapies, first aid, gardening and a taster for classroom assistants
- a series of 1-day courses with specific themes – architecture and product design, motorsport, mentoring skills, business languages
- a programme of 2 or 3-week courses from all curriculum areas in one college, including writing for pleasure and profit, make-up, holiday languages, business presentation skills and craft activities with children.

9.22 Where other institutions reported that they had been successful in offering new courses in this category, they were qualification-based courses relating directly to employment, such as those relating to Health & Safety and Basic Food Hygiene. These were probably delivered in 6 hours under this initiative rather than in 9 hours under the previous funding arrangements.

Staffing

9.23 In general, part-time staff appear to have been most widely used as tutors or facilitators on short courses. Many institutions emphasised that they were trying to use staff who were experienced in working with adult learners who might be lacking in confidence.

9.24 In the sample of institutions visited there was only one example of an institution using franchising to deliver short courses. This was a college with a large rural catchment area that franchised to the community education service and other providers. Two other colleges reported that they would consider franchising this provision in future, but wanted to gain experience themselves first.

Fees

9.25 Only three of the 20 institutions visited were charging any fees for their 3 and 6-hour courses. Two of these were in areas classified as having low widening participation factors and the third in an area classified as medium, which is probably reflected in the institutions' ability to charge fees. All three institutions said that the main reason for charging a fee was to ensure high conversion rates between enrolment and participation on the courses. They had all had experience of people booking several places on free courses and then not turning up.

9.26 Analysis of the enrolment data for 1999/2000 shows that, as would be expected, basic skills provision was free. Eighteen per cent of learners enrolling on short ICT courses paid fees, and 51% of learners on the 'other' adult courses paid fees. This appears to substantiate the impression that many of the courses in this last category were just replacing courses that had previously been 9 or more hours.

Marketing

9.27 Institutions used a range of printed media to promote their short courses. Leaflets and posters were the most common, followed by advertisements in free newspapers. In some cases leaflet or newspaper delivery services were used to target particular postcodes or housing estates. Short courses had sometimes been included in part-time course brochures, but not in every case.

9.28 Many institutions had given the courses titles to make them more attractive (eg 'IT's for you' or 'maths for mums & dads' for basic computing and numeracy courses). One college was introducing the idea of 'computer parties', at which a small group would meet at an informal venue – perhaps the home of a member of the group. The college supplied a facilitator and laptops and the group would work through a 3-hour introductory IT package.

9.29 Many of the courses were offered in community venues, and institutions used the venues' own networks of contacts to publicise the courses in a well-defined geographical area. This might involve targeting other groups already using a particular centre, or using the centre's own staff to promote the courses. Institutions with outreach workers or community linkworkers were generally active in using such staff to raise awareness of the courses in the their locality.

9.30 Some institutions made a conscious effort, given the short duration of these courses, to minimise the amount of administration for the learner at the start of the course. Hence, telephone enrolments were used so that the learner could be presented with their enrolment form almost completed, and in some centres learners had enrolled at information and advice sessions held before the courses began.

10 Impact of the initiative

10.1 We have characterised this initiative as having the two key aims of attracting new learners and then providing them with progression opportunities. In this section we assess its impact in these two areas.

Growth and widening participation

10.2 When considering the issue of 'new learners' it is helpful to distinguish between different categories. Learners may be:

- new to a subject
- new to a curriculum area (eg Basic Skills, ICT)
- new to an institution
- new to learning (ie new to any institution).

10.3 National and local information systems are not generally able to provide good quality information that would enable analysis on this basis, and it is clear that further studies should take account of what national and international evidence there is relating to the role played by short courses in stimulating demand for learning.

10.4 Almost all institutions were confident that the short ICT courses were very successful in attracting people who had not attended their institution before, although in many cases this was intuitive or anecdotal evidence at the time of the fieldwork rather than evidence based on analysis of their student database for previous years. (Most institutions have indicated that they will be able to provide more detailed statistical data later in the year.) Nevertheless, it was fairly compelling evidence based on the institutions' experience and knowledge of their local markets.

10.5 The simple fact that the courses were short was cited as a major factor in attracting new learners; it is clear that there are significant numbers of people willing to try a very short course without a qualification attached, who have not considered longer programmes in the past. In that sense there seems little doubt that this initiative has succeeded, at least in the ICT area, to encourage new learners to come forward.

10.6 The best evidence for the ability of these short courses to attract new learners came from those institutions that had specifically targeted areas where there was little provision or where participation rates were low. These were the institutions that were using community venues and non-traditional centres to try to reach new groups of people.

Learner profile
An accident in 1999 brought Derek's career as a construction fitter to an end. His brothers persuaded him to try a short IT course at the local neighbourhood centre, which was a 15-minute walk away. After a 6-hour taster course in July, he has done basic computing and the European Computing Driving Licence. Derek is continuing his studies at the main college site and is much more confident about finding work in a new field.

10.7 The position with basic skills courses is less encouraging. Certainly the initiative has encouraged some sixth form colleges to offer more basic skills provision than they have in the past, and it is reasonable to assume that some of the learners attracted will be new to the system. However, the overall numbers enrolled are not high. It appears that, unlike in the ICT curriculum area, in many institutions there is already a significant amount of activity involving short basic skills courses. That is not to say that the initiative was not welcomed by institutions – indeed the researchers often heard that the initiative was a very good one because it gave recognition to basic skills provision. But to date, the initiative does not appear to have been instrumental in changing the pattern of basic skills provision. An important caveat to this observation is that the great majority of institutions reported that some of the learners enrolling on ICT courses had basic skills needs; some people are more likely to say they need training in IT than in reading or writing, and others may feel there is less stigma attached to training in IT because of its newness. Therefore, it is certainly the case that more people with basic skills needs were enrolled than can be inferred from the enrolment data. This issue is explored in more detail in the section below, dealing with progression.

10.8 The confusion created by the guidance on the other adult short courses certainly prevented many institutions from actively promoting new provision in this area. Most of the enrolments achieved in this category appear to have been learners who would have enrolled in the normal course of events; the courses themselves may have been reduced from 9 hours to 6 now that funding is available.

Progression

10.9 Progression for learners is not necessarily a simple question of moving to a higher level course. It is helpful to distinguish between:

- vertical progression (movement from subject A at Level 1 to subject A at Level 2)
- horizontal progression (movement from subject A at Level 1 to subject B at Level 1)
- lateral progression (movement from subject A at Level 1 to subject B at Level 2)
- maintenance progression (no movement in subject or level but avoidance of regression, applicable to some older learners and some adults with learning difficulties).

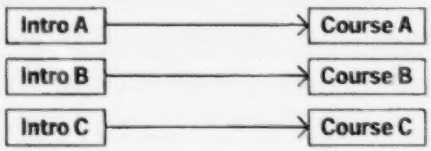
10.10 Most institutions had paid particular attention to issues of progression when considering how to implement this scheme. They recognised that a successful short course would prepare learners for another course, and in most cases had structured the programmes so that progression would be easy – for example the longer courses might start the following week. In most cases staff were very aware that progression was an expected outcome from the short courses, and considerable efforts were made to advise learners about possible next steps.

10.11 There is no question that institutions felt that these very short courses were especially useful in diagnosing learners' needs and in helping to suggest appropriate follow-on courses. Institutions were confident that learners who had benefited from a short course would be more likely to complete and achieve on subsequent courses.

10.12 For ICT courses, reported progression rates were high in almost all institutions – often as high as 80–90% and rarely below 50%.

10.13 As outlined in Section 9, a number of different approaches were used for the ICT courses, and it is when considering progression that the differences are most important. Institutions that offered true 'tasters' had in general identified a number of different progression opportunities for learners, so that a single taster session might be seen as having several possible exit routes (ie it catered for two or more of the types of progression identified in paragraph 10.15):

10.14 Other institutions had designed the short course programme so that the short courses were seen as introducing other specific courses (ie in general catering for vertical progression only):



10.15 The first of these approaches would appear to offer the learner more flexibility and, given that many of the learners enrolling on the short courses were perhaps unsure of what they wanted to do and were lacking in confidence in varying degrees, is recommended as a general model.

10.16 This is especially important in the light of the findings of many institutions that some of the learners enrolling for ICT courses were in fact interested in progressing to other curriculum areas. In some institutions, where this initiative was managed and delivered by ICT departments, the only progression opportunities offered to learners were for other ICT courses. Those colleges that regarded the short course ICT provision as generic had involved staff from other curriculum areas in the planning of these programmes and therefore were able to offer a wider range of progression opportunities to learners.

10.17 Those institutions that had enrolled most learners under this initiative reported that a significant proportion of the learners had basic skills needs. In fact more than one institution was using the ICT programme to target people with basic skills needs in some parts of its catchment area. Its philosophy was that the need for people to be trained in ICT was so well recognised that there were far fewer barriers in terms of people presenting themselves as learners. Based on the experience in other institutions, this appears to be a sound approach, and there is good evidence that for some learners these short courses in ICT are a real opportunity to start to address many other learning needs. This is an exciting possibility, but it does raise a number of issues for institutions. Clearly there is scope for more in-depth study of this phenomenon, and we set out some of these issues here.

10.18 The first is that staff delivering ICT tasters and introductory courses must be able to recognise basic skills needs and be able to take appropriate action in terms of advising the learner about possible ways forward. For some institutions this may imply a staff development need for their ICT staff. Such staff also need to be aware of the ranges of learning support available and the referral arrangements. Referral may not be a simple matter and needs to be handled sensitively, since some learners may not recognise or accept that they have needs in this area. An alternative approach could be that basic skills tutors could be trained to deliver introductory ICT courses.

10.19 The second is that many learners who start on basic ICT programmes may have a quite different end in mind. For example, they might have particular career aims but have recognised that they need some knowledge of ICT before they can begin to train towards that aim. In such cases it might not be appropriate for the learner to progress to another ICT course, as a course in their chosen vocational area might include the ICT skills they need. Similarly they might be considering buying a computer in order to work from home, in which case their needs might be better addressed through training in administration or accounts.

10.20 The third is that there might be a group of learners who do need literacy, numeracy or language support (ie 'traditional' ABE or ESOL) before they progress to other areas, or provided within any future programme of study. Clearly for these learners it is important that referral and diagnostic arrangements are in place so they can receive the support they require.

10.21 A final issue for institutions to consider is the nature of the learning environments they provide. There appears to be a good case for providing institutional space for a 'light touch' environment, where learners feel free to experiment and try options which might not appear wise at first sight to experienced observers. We should recognise that learners' first – and second – steps may be tentative and unpredictable, and the provision of an environment that facilitates such steps may be one of the most important support mechanisms.

Learner profile

Bill did a HND after he was de-mobbed from active service in World War II. He is now retired, and sometimes attends a centre for people with disabilities, where the caretaker told him about some short courses that were being offered at the centre. All three of Bill's sons have PCs at home, so he thought he would give an IT taster a try in the summer. He was hooked, and after attending a course at the main college site he gained his CLAIT qualification in October.

11 Aspects of good practice

11.1 One of the purposes of any pilot scheme is to provide examples of emerging good practice to inform future initiatives. The investigations undertaken to produce this evaluation have highlighted a number of areas where good practice appears to have enhanced the impact of this initiative, and which would warrant further study.

- The marketing which has been most effective in attracting learners from the target groups was based on the centres where the courses took place, rather than relying solely on press advertisements or leaflets. Where other agencies used those centres, their resources were particularly useful in reaching learners.
- Some high quality curriculum materials were seen during the fieldwork. They included clear objectives and descriptions of learning outcomes, described in clear language. Learners might produce their own certificate as part of the course, and they were given information about progression possibilities. They were asked, in brief and simple terms, to evaluate the course.
- Some sessions included advice on progression, sometimes from a visiting advice worker or curriculum manager.
- At least two institutions visited used a 'telesales' approach to enrol and advise learners. This was seen as friendly and meant that very little time was taken up with administration in the course itself.
- Some institutions, as part of their evaluation of the new provision, analysed whether the learners had participated in learning before.
- An LEA made sure that there were clear progression routes from its courses to those at the local college.
- Some institutions had specifically chosen tutors with excellent 'people skills' and a community focus.
- Tutor-led courses in ICT, where learners were taught as a group, were particularly welcomed by learners.
- Some institutions were creating mobile provision by using laptops to bring courses to non-traditional venues.
- The 'feel' of the learning environment was important to learners, who feel it is important to be able to just drop in to a non-threatening centre.

12 Initial areas of concern

12.1 The evaluation has raised some areas of concern, which warrant attention. Further analysis and consideration may enable some of these concerns to be described more precisely.

12.2 Many institutions have information systems that do not enable them to say whether learners were 'new' in any sense. The fact that learners do not have a unique identifier inhibits the collection of information about their learning history.

- In some institutions, progression opportunities from short ICT courses were limited to other ICT courses. Given the wide range of goals described by learners attracted to this taster provision, this appears to be too limiting.
- The low take-up of basic skills courses must be a cause for concern. It appears that institutions need to respond to the fact that many people with basic skills needs will enrol for an IT course but not for a basic skills course.
- Further work is needed to determine whether, in 2000/01, institutions with higher widening participation factors were less likely to make use of this initiative, as appears to have been the case in 1999/2000.
- The further guidance provided about the 'other' category of short courses confused some institutions and resulted in some appropriate provision being withdrawn.
- Some institutions expressed a concern that, in terms of claiming funding, the amount of administration involved is the same for very short courses and for longer ones.
- Further work is needed to clarify the statistical anomalies found in the data for the 'other' category.

New funding arrangements for adult learners, announced by the Further Education Funding Council for England (FEFC) in Spring 2000, have assisted institutions in offering new short courses – including basic skills and ICT. The courses are of 3 or 6 hours duration, can be designed either as tasters or introductory modules and do not have to lead to a qualification. The key aim of this initiative is to attract new learners into courses that can provide progression opportunities. This programme has been successful, attracting many adults who acknowledge their need for ICT training without recognising or admitting their basic skills needs. Fieldwork has shown that for many learners these courses are valuable in providing a taste of learning itself, and that many adults then go on to take further courses.

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